

Red Grange, the Greatest Collegiate Football Player of All Time

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Teacher:

*A streak of fire, a breath of flame
Eluding all who reach and clutch;
A gray ghost thrown into the game
That rival hands may never touch;
A rubber bounding, blasting soul
Whose destination is the goal. -
Red Grange of Illinois!1
—Grantland Rice*

Though this poem may seem odd and corny, the person it describes is none the less one of the greatest football players of all time. This is the description of Harold "Red" Grange, who is as important to football in America as Babe Ruth is to baseball and as Jack Dempsey is to boxing. Even Sports Illustrated recognized the importance of this athlete in a special issue celebrating "yesterday's heroes" and featured Red Grange "An Original Superstar" on the cover. Grange experienced exceptional football careers in high school and while with the Chicago Bears. However, his most impressive work as a football athlete came from his years on the University of Illinois football team.

In the rustic isolated town of Forksville, Pennsylvania, on June 13, 1903, Harold Grange was born. Between chasing his dog and imitating older boys who played baseball or participated in track meets. Grange showed an interest in athletics from an early age. When he was five, his mother died and his remaining family moved from Forksville to Wheaton, Illinois. Just like any other child he performed chores and went to school, but his favorite part of the day was after school when he had time to play football, basketball, or baseball. He was very active and played sports year round. However, his athletic career almost ended before it began when he was eight years old. When Grange was examined for an ordinary cold, the doctor detected a heart murmur

and told him not to be involved in any rigorous exercise. Not being aware of the risk, he continued to play with his friends. Yet, after a slight injury he had to admit to his father what he had been doing. Fortunately, his father allowed him to continue participating in athletic events, and it was confirmed before he entered high school that the heart murmur had been a misdiagnosis."

Grange entered Wheaton High School in the fall of 1918. A few days after enrolling, he tried out for the football team. Since he had little formal experience in the game, he did not really know what position to play. He inquired which position was open and took it: the right end. Wheaton only won two games in this season. Yet Red Grange's true potential was shown the one time he carried the ball that year and made a touchdown. Left halfback became the regular position for Grange during his sophomore, junior, and senior years. Grange also participated in track every year and was captain his sophomore, junior, and senior years as well. He competed in the 100-yard dash, 220-yard dash, broad jump, high jump, and low and high hurdles. He represented Wheaton at state competition for the 100, 220, and broad jump, and he won all six events in the Little Seven Conference. Red Grange also played basketball and baseball, which he considered his favorite sports. By the end of his high school athletic career Red Grange had won sixteen letters in four sports.

Grange entered the University of Illinois in 1922. More than 300 players turned out for freshmen football tryouts and even though he thought he would not make the team, he did. Grange even scored two touchdowns in a scrimmage game against the varsity team. The 1922 freshmen team was one of the strongest Illinois ever had. It was on this team that Red Grange learned many of the fundamentals that he had missed in high school. In Grange's first game of his sophomore season against Nebraska in 1923, he scored all of Illinois' touchdowns, leading to

a 24-7 victory. By the end of his sophomore season Grange led the Big Ten scorers with 12 touchdowns and 72 points and was named All-American halfback.

The Illinois versus Michigan game of October 18, 1924, was the boiling point of a heated rivalry. Grange and his number 77 jersey were lifted into legendary status by this game. The 5-foot 11, 175-pound junior was as elusive as a ghost to the Michigan defenders, which led to the poem of the galloping ghost. Grange was surprised that the opening kickoff was directed to him. However, he avoided several tackles and sprinted 95 yards for a touchdown. Grange continued to execute marvelous runs and score points for the Illini, including a 67-yard run. He followed up with two more outstanding touchdown dashes of 56 and 45 yards to give Illinois a lead of 27-0. All four of the touchdowns that Grange had scored covered a total of 262 yards and came within the first twelve minutes Yet Grange still was not finished. In the second half he ran eleven more yards to score the fifth touchdown and passed twenty yards for the final touchdown, The final score in the Illinois versus Michigan game was 39-14. Every touchdown in this game was, in large part, due to the actions of Red Grange.

In the final year of his college career Grange drew thousands of fans and for the third time was named All-American. Immediately after his final game with the University of Illinois, Grange began his professional career with the Chicago Bears. His jump to professional football brought credibility to the struggling professional leagues. The first games that Grange played were part of a tour, 19 games in 67 days. In every city that Grange played he drew enormous crowds and he came increasingly popular. In the 1927 season he suffered a serious knee injury. As a result he stayed out of the 1928 season and was never the same offensive threat he had once been. Yet he came back in the 1929 season and played for six more years. In the National Football League's first championship game in 1933, Grange helped lead his team to victory with

his defensive skills causing both coaches to proclaim him the best defensive player they had ever seen.

After his football career Grange continued to have an impact on the sport by being an analyst for the Bears and on network television college games. Red Grange is a member of both the College Football Hall of Fame and the Pro Football Hall of Fame. The grand total of his high school, college and professional football statistics are 162 touchdowns and 86 conversions for an overwhelming 1058 points. In 1969, to commemorate college football's hundredth anniversary the Football Writers' Association of America decided to choose an All-American player for the past 100 years. Red Grange was unanimously chosen. [From John M. Carroll, Red Grange and the Rise of Modern Football; Champaign News-Gazette, Oct.21 and 26, 1924; Red Grange and Ira Morton, The Red Grange Story; Ralph Hickok, "Grange, 'Red' (Harold E.)." Sports Biographies 2002, www.hickoksports.com/biograph/grangered. (Sept. 1, 2003); "Red Grange," Chicago Bears 2001-2003, www.chicagobears.com/history/index.cfm?cont_id=70230>, (Sept. 1, 2003); Larry Schwartz, "Gallopig Ghost Scared Opponents" www.espn.go.com/sportscentury/feataures/00014213, (Sept. 1, 2003); Larry Schwartz, "More Info on Red Grange" www.epsn.go.com/classic/grangeredadd (Sept. 1, 2003); Gene Schoor and Henry Gilford, Red Grange, Football's Greatest Halfback.]